Stay Safe

Help People

Boycott the Billionaires

When the Time Comes, Take to the Streets

Help Rebuild When This Is Over

Survive

SURVIVE THE TYRANT!

An RPG-style guide to living
under an oppressive regime

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Introduction

This free RPG-style guide is designed to teach ordinary folks how to live in an authoritarian state.

The main goal is to help you survive and stay free. That doesn't just help you—it lets you help others. No one can help anyone else when they're arrested or dead.

The secondary goal is to let you be able to look at yourself in the mirror and hold your head up high after the authoritarian regime ends. No single person can end a tyranny. But along the way we can all choose whether to help people who are in trouble or turn our backs. We can all choose whether to make things harder or easier for the regime.

When this is over, people will look back and wish that they'd done their part. Here's how you can do your part while staying safe.

If you find this guide valuable, please pass it along. Print some copies to leave at a game store, bookstore, coffee shop, school, or library. Give copies to some friends. Boost it on social media or post it to a community site like a Discord or Reddit.

About Us

Your anonymous authors have studied history, computer security, economics, and law. As parents, we're committed to not just to surviving, but helping make a world where our kids can grow up safe. Above all, we have family histories of surviving oppressive regimes in the 20th Century that we're drawing on. Our ancestors gave us their wisdom of how to get through to a better day. And that's what we want to share with you.

Experience and Leveling Up

A typical RPG campaign begins with low-level characters who achieve small goals. As they gain experience, abilities, and power, they take on greater challenges until, at high levels, a small party of adventurers may save the world.

That is not how the survivors of tyranny describe their experiences. Day to day life in an authoritarian state may be monotonous and marked by anxiety about staying safe as well as grief for a nation that is being plundered by the regime. Long stretches of time may pass, punctuated by a small number of intense events—perhaps a handful of protests under the threat of violence or a few near-misses with Quislings or Corrupt Bureaucrats.

This is not a game.

As you gain experience and identify the informants and adversaries in your local area, your judgment for how far to extend yourself may improve. You may get better at your character class and start helping more people in need. But you should not try to be a hero, and you should take care not to overextend yourself. Regimes are defeated by millions of small acts of resistance by ordinary people. And regimes may be especially dangerous as they begin to fail. Always keep your own safety as your top priority. You're incredibly valuable in your own right, and we're going to need you to help rebuild when this all ends.

Goodbye, Good Luck, and Stay Safe

Your authors are not natural Agitators. We felt strongly about making this guide because we want to share the wisdom that was passed down to us by our ancestors, but from now on we'll be choosing more secret roles for ourselves.

This guide has no copyright protections. Those who are more expert than us are welcome to improve it. It might benefit from a reading list curated by a librarian or historian. If you have the skill to translate it to other languages or make it more accessible in other ways, please do. If you feel inspired, please add art and improve the visual design, or make it into a playable game. Above all, please copy and share it.

We wish you good judgment and good fortune, and we give you our blessings. Have strength, have faith, and perhaps we will meet sometime when this is all over.

The Setting: The Economics of Tyranny

And what's true for your money is also true for your labor. If you have a job that strengthens your local community, then please keep working hard. But if you work for the regime, a billionaire-owned business, or a large corporation, and you don't choose to leave that job, then slow down. Every bit of extra productivity you provide strengthens the regime. Work to rule: do exactly what is required and no more.

An authoritarian regime can be severely weakened by the combined effect of thousands or millions of people declining to comply in advance with its desires, shifting their spending to support smaller and local businesses, and refusing to do extra work for the regime and the businesses that support it. When a specific event like a general strike leads a regime to fall, people will point to that single event as the cause, but really it's the months and years of noncompliance and slow compliance by citizens that weakened the regime enough for the general strike to work.

There's a reason it's called "resistance." Like friction or the opposition to the flow of electric current, when people practice resistance they impede the progress of the regime. Eventually, when the economy grinds down, there's an opportunity for change.

> In the Soviet Union... our system was so cumbersome that it was not capable of reacting to the challenges of the science and technology revolution...
>
> It was a shame..., we were planning to create a commission headed by the secretary of the Central Committee, ...to solve the problem of women's pantyhose. Imagine a country that flies into space, launches Sputniks... and it can't resolve the problem of women's pantyhose.
>
> There's no toothpaste, no soap powder, not the basic necessities of life. It was incredible and humiliating to work in such a government. And so our people were already worked up, and that is why the dissident movement occurred.
>
> *Mikhail Gorbachev, last General Secretary of the USSR*
>
> https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/minitext/int_mikhailgorbachev.html

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Character Classes

People who survive tyranny either express pride about the ways they helped others or regret that they didn't do more for the people around them. This section lists a few ways that people have contributed to bringing a better day.

We recommend you pick one character class and stick with it. Avoid multiclassing. Mixing roles makes it more likely that you'll be compromised. And for most people, if you're doing one of these things, it's enough! (But when the mass protests and general strikes come, the more people who participate, the better.)

We have not included "leader in the resistance" as a character class, and none of the roles involve any kind of violence. Violence is often counterproductive! This guide is meant for ordinary people with no special training in building movements.

Archivist/Journaler

Authoritarian regimes try to destroy information that they find inconvenient. It's important for people to preserve that information for the future.

Books, official records, and news sources that describe the past may be purged by the regime. The Archivist collects that information and stores it so it's not lost.

Since the regime does not allow free expression of negative information, the media will not provide a clear and accurate picture of current events. The Journaler keeps a record of important incidents and of what daily life is like, so people in the future can understand what happened. Photos and video may be especially powerful, as the reaction to the killing of George Floyd demonstrated.

There's no need to do anything with the information that the Archivist/Journaler preserves. You are not a spy! Just recording and keeping the information is enough. The Diary of Anne Frank is an incredibly powerful and personal testament to the toll of living in an oppressive regime, but it only exists because her diary was published after the war. You'll know when the time is right to share what you saved.

Everyone will have a different experience of these dark times, and you're the best judge of what you should record and preserve. If you think something is important and worth saving, you're probably right.

The Setting: The Economics of Tyranny

Authoritarian regimes have weak points, and they can become quite vulnerable at times. You can help weaken the regime with your actions and decisions.

The regime's goal is to appear all-powerful, but large-scale organization is a constant challenge. Authoritarian governments struggle to hire competent leaders because they value loyalty over capability. And since they're trying to control so much behavior from so many people, the task is unmanageable without voluntary compliance.

> Do not obey in advance.
>
> Most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given. In times like these, individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and then offer themselves without being asked. A citizen who adapts in this way is teaching power what it can do.
>
> Anticipatory obedience is a political tragedy.
>
> *Timothy Snyder, On Tyranny*

The regime's most loyal allies are the ultra-rich. Authoritarian regimes depend on the support of billionaire oligarchs and their businesses. Those businesses depend on all of us to be their customers. Many social media networks, newspapers, and other media organizations are owned and controlled by individual billionaires. As much as you can, avoid supporting billionaire-owned businesses. Be wary of anything you see on a billionaire's social network or newspaper. If you can, cancel your accounts with them entirely.

Regimes also depend on the goodwill of hundreds of other large corporations, who demand economic results as reflected in the stock market. The more you can shift your spending to smaller businesses and to local businesses in your community, the more pressure it puts on the regime.

Getting Treasure: Family, Fun, and Art

People who lived through authoritarian regimes consistently say that family and friend relationships were crucial to their survival. People who isolated themselves generally had much worse outcomes.

It's not a coincidence that this guide is written in the style of an RPG. Getting together to play tabletop games is not just a great way to strengthen connections or an excuse for secret business. It's also fun.

Those who survived also stress the importance of art, gardening, music, and beauty. Get outdoors into nature! Finding joy and living a meaningful life while under the shadow of oppression gives the strength and resilience necessary to overcome tough moments.

Fear, division, despair, and apathy are tools of the regime. Defeat despair by continuing to live a life rich with relationships and experiences.

Quilt: *Housetop—Nine-Block Half-Log Cabin Variation*
by Lucy P. Pettway of Gee's Bend Alabama, Jim Crow era
https://www.nga.gov/stories/quilts-embody-legacy-black-america.html

Character Classes

Agitator

Protest can be an effective tool against an authoritarian regime. People need to be reminded that there is an alternative to complying with the regime. As the voice of the oppressed, the Agitator identifies the problems and injustices caused by the state.

Protest also draws regime resources and attention away from other forms of resistance. Just by being out there and loud, the Agitator makes it easier for others to perform their roles in secret.

This can be a dangerous role—by its nature it draws the attention of the regime. So it's important to be thoughtful, careful, and strategic, and to stay within the bounds set by the regime. A reckless Agitator won't last long. Listen to people with greater knowledge, training, and experience, and follow their lead. Be ready when the call comes to join in protests and public disobedience.

Community Leader

Local government officials, business owners, religious leaders, and other community leaders can play an essential role in protecting their communities. But because they do their work in public they are often placed in difficult positions—squeezed between demands made by the regime and the duties they feel to their constituents, customers, and congregations.

One of the most important things the Community Leader will do is connect people. If someone knows of someone who needs shelter and someone else can provide that shelter, the Community Leader can connect them. If someone has an interesting piece of information, the Community Leader can tell it to an Archivist/Journaler. It's safest for the Community Leader to make the connection or pass the information and then step away and not involve themselves any more than necessary.

Community Leaders can't save everyone, and they shouldn't try to. Their community already benefits tremendously from having the Community Leader in place instead of a Quisling (see page 9). It's painful to let some needs go unmet, but Community Leaders should take particular care to prioritize keeping themselves safe above any other concern.

The Obstructionist

Some of the most effective resistance has come from within a regime, or from businesses or local governments that the regime relied on. It's possible for good people inside corrupt organizations to slow the progress of tyranny and save many lives

In occupied Denmark, when Nazi Germany ordered deportation of Danish Jews to the concentration camps, local police and other government officials worked with the resistance to warn and evacuate 99% of the Jewish community to Sweden.

More generally, authoritarian regimes are susceptible to people avoiding immoral orders as long as possible by moving slowly, seeking unnecessary clarification, expressing confusion, redirecting attention to solve nonproblems, and otherwise slowing down the process. This is sometimes called malicious compliance, working to rule, or quiet quitting. The Obstructionist should obey direct orders and be careful to not draw attention, but a series of even minor delays and obstacles can sometimes entirely stop an act of evil or significantly reduce its effect.

> [One] type of simple sabotage... is based on universal opportunities to make faulty decisions, to adopt a non-cooperative attitude, and to induce others to follow suit. Making a faulty decision may be simply a matter of placing tools in one spot instead of another. A non-cooperative attitude may involve nothing more than creating an unpleasant situation among one's fellow workers, engaging in bickerings, or displaying surliness and stupidity.
>
> This type of activity, sometimes referred to as the "human element," is frequently responsible for accidents, delays, and general obstruction even under normal conditions. The potential saboteur should discover what types of faulty decisions and non-cooperation are normally found in his kind of work and should then devise his sabotage to enlarge that "margin for error."
>
> *Simple Sabotage, OSS (precursor to the CIA), 1944*
>
> https://www.cia.gov/static/5c875f3ec660e092cf893f60b4a288df/SimpleSabotage.pdf

Obey the Laws, Stay Sober in Public, and Pick a Lawyer

History is full of dissidents who were captured because they broke laws unrelated to their opposition to the government, or because they slipped up while drunk or stoned in public. Don't drink in public, don't fight, and obey the traffic laws.

Always carry the name and phone number of a lawyer with you. Even in authoritarian legal systems, evidence matters and lawyers can help. If police stop you, ask to speak with the lawyer and don't say anything else until you are speaking privately with the lawyer. Just shut up.

Be Careful With Your Car

Consider buying a dash camera for your vehicle. Dash cameras became extremely popular in Russia under Vladimir Putin as scams that take advantage of the corrupt legal system flourished. And be aware that license plate readers and other auto trackers may be tracking your car. Consider using a bicycle when possible—they're more difficult to track.

Simplify Your Finances

If you draw the regime's attention, it may turn tax authorities against you. This is punitive, causes fear, wastes your time, and lets the regime look through your papers for evidence. You can reduce your risks by simplifying your finances in advance so there's less to submit in an audit.

Use cash when you can. Every form of digital payment creates a trail that can be followed. Your credit cards, debit cards, and digital payment apps are constantly snitching on you.

Be Proactive About Your Health

Access to health care resources may degrade over time. If you have essential prescriptions or other medical needs, get extras. Learn first aid and how to take care of simple procedures yourself if possible. Try to stay physically fit—some of your authors' ancestors had to escape bad situations by foot in difficult terrain.

Your Devices Are Being Tracked

The location of every mobile device is constantly tracked. When you're carrying your phone, the regime knows where you are. That's also true of everyone you interact with. One of the easiest ways to catch people who are working together is for the regime to check which phones came together and stayed in the same place for a while. If you can, leave your device at home when you meet with people.

Don't Rise to Violence

In an authoritarian regime, almost any situation will become much worse if you have a weapon in your hand. If the secret police raid your house, a weapon is far more likely to get you killed than give you any advantage. Don't rush out to buy a weapon, and above all don't buy a gun if you don't have training. If you must, get a baseball bat instead.

At protests and other gatherings, nonviolence is more effective than the alternative. If the regime initiates violence, then responding with violence only gives them license to escalate further.

Keep control of your emotions, stay calm, and keep your cool. Politeness, kindness, and humor in response to aggression can be disarming and help you avoid harm. Remember always that your main goal is to survive.

Physical Security

Assess the security of your home and your other personal spaces. Good locks are important, as are good window shades and fences that obscure sight lines. The regime may use drones, so think about what it looks like from above.

Stockpile Necessities and Make Emergency Plans

Store extra food and other necessities in case of shortages or if you need to unexpectedly take someone in. Make plans in advance and tell them to your family so if you're the one being threatened or blackmailed, you have somewhere to go and your family knows where to find you.

Transport and Sanctuary

Every authoritarian government selects groups to demonize. Regimes target racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; trans and other LGBTQ people; immigrants; the disabled; and political opponents. These people risk being harassed, intimidated, placed in internment camps, or killed. They often desperately need safe passage and a safe place to stay. By providing Transport and Sanctuary, you can directly save lives.

Opposition movements also need to move materials, messages, and key people around. Those key people need housing while they conduct business. By providing Transport and Sanctuary, you provide resources that help destabilize the regime.

The Underground Railroad

The need for secrecy was paramount as there were severe penalties for slaves and those who helped them to freedom. Therefore, railroad terminology was used to maintain secrecy and confuse the slave catchers.

The code words often used on the Underground Railroad were: "tracks" (routes fixed by abolitionist sympathizers); "stations" or "depots" (hiding places); "conductors" (guides on the Underground Railroad); "agents" (sympathizers who helped the slaves connect to the Railroad); "station masters" (those who hid slaves in their homes); "passengers," "cargo," "fleece," or "freight" (escaped slaves); "tickets" (indicated that slaves were traveling on the Railroad); "stockholders" (financial supporters who donated to the Railroad); "Freedom Trails" (the routes of the Railroad); "terminal," "heaven," or "Promised Land" (Canada and the northern free states); and "the drinking gourd" (the Big Dipper constellation—a star in this constellation pointed to the North Star, located on the end of the Little Dipper's handle).

Dr. Bryan Walls, Underground Railroad Terminology, Buffalo Toronto Public Media

https://www.wned.org/television/wned-productions/underground-railroad-the-william-still-story/stories-of-freedom/underground-railroad-terminology/

Adversaries

Secret Police Intelligence agents who monitor activities within the regime's territory.

The Stasi in East Germany may have been the most oppressive secret police in history, worse than the KGB in the USSR during the Cold War or the German Gestapo during World War II. America also has a long history of secret police. The FBI in the J. Edgar Hoover era conducted surveillance on the administration's political enemies, and state or local undercover police forces dating back to the Slave Patrols have enforced racist codes of conduct.

Informants Civilians who sell out their neighbors by reporting their actions to the regime.

Informants are not always willing collaborators. For example, the Stasi used fear, threats, and blackmail to create a network of informants that infiltrated every part of civilian life. They arrested, tortured, and harassed thousands of citizens for illegal speech or "inappropriate activities" that were reported by fellow citizens.

Paramilitaries Violent security forces that are not part of a country's legitimate armed forces.

The German Brownshirts and Italian Blackshirts helped establish fascist regimes by harassing, intimidating, and violently coercing civilians. The American Ku Klux Klan suppressed freedom and enforced authoritarian policies after the Civil War and during the Jim Crow era.

"Need to Know" Keeps Everyone Safe

Don't share unnecessary information with anyone. Tell people only what they need to know. Then, if they're questioned by the regime, they can honestly say they don't know what you didn't tell them, which protects both you and them.

Above all, don't tell people in your network who else is in your network, unless they need to know for some reason. Everyone in your adventuring party stays safer if they don't know each other's identities.

Avoid Talking to Adversaries

If you find yourself being questioned, say as little as possible. Silence is your best protection. Just shut up.

If you're being questioned, the regime already knows something, but they may not know very much. You can't make things better by talking, but people frequently make things worse. Just shut up.

If you must deal with a Corrupt Bureaucrat or another of the Adversaries, conduct your business as quickly and simply as possible, with no idle talk. Every extra word you say to the regime is a chance to be caught. As much as you can, just shut up.

Be Wary of Everyone Else

The regime may coerce ordinary people into becoming informants or posing as people who need help, or they may play other dirty tricks to try to catch us. Be careful about who you trust. If something doesn't feel right, trust your instincts.

Some signs that someone from the regime is trying to set you up include: they're overly enthusiastic and willing to bend over backwards to have you help them; they try to have you say out loud what you're planning to do; they ask you to do violence or other showy criminal acts; they press you to do something you're not comfortable doing; they suggest there's no need to follow good security practices; or they provide resources like offering to drive you to where they want you to do something. If someone's plan sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Skill and Ability Checks: How to Stay Safe

Your first priority is to stay safe.

This bears repeating. Your first priority is to stay safe. Your community needs you. And when the regime falls, your community will need you for the recovery.

Know your neighbors—friendly and not so friendly. Be aware of your surroundings. Make contingency plans. You're in occupied territory, and you can't ever let your guard down.

Communications Security

We live in a time of unprecedented communications capabilities. We have instant text messaging, social media, phones, video calls, etc.

We live in a time of unprecedented ability for governments to monitor people. The regime has incredibly powerful surveillance tools. Assume every word you write on a device—including every text—can be read by the regime. Assume that every time you send a message or make a call, they can easily find out who you contacted and when.

Face to face meetings are the best way to keep things secret. A message delivered by hand on paper, a flash drive, or an SD card is also fairly secure as long as it is destroyed after the message is received. The greatest risk happens any time a message is transmitted through wires or over the air.

It's possible to do training to improve your memory, and a message that is memorized and never written down can never be intercepted.

If you must send a message, good encryption and cryptography from apps like Signal and VPNs can help, but they're limited tools. The fact that a message was sent at all can be used against you even if the contents are secret. And even very good codes can be cracked. If you draw their attention, the regime can intercept whatever you send.

This does not mean you should stop using devices. Quite the opposite. Live your life as usual. Communicate with people using texts and social media the way you normally would. That way, when you do need to communicate with someone and meeting in person is not an option, a coded message might be missed in the sea of other communications you sent.

Adversaries

Quislings High-level government officials who abuse their power to advance the regime.

> Vidkun Quisling led a political party that tried to stop Norway from resisting the Nazi invasion in World War II. When the Germans completed the invasion, they installed Quisling as the leader of a puppet government. Ever since then, people who gain power in the government by collaborating with the regime have been known as Quislings.
>
> After the war, Vidkun Quisling was tried and executed for his crimes.

Corrupt Bureaucrats Lower-level government workers who take advantage of the regime's inherent corruption to demand bribes and line their own pockets.

Criminals As the rule of law degrades and corruption increases, scammers and violent criminals will take advantage of the lack of fair policing.

Criminals may build relationships with Corrupt Bureaucrats, and they will prey on demonized groups because they know the police will not protect disfavored people.

Your Adventuring Party

The single most valuable thing you can do to help defeat the regime is to build relationships of trust. The regime tries to separate us and make us fear each other to distract us from how they are looting the nation.

A network of mutual trust and mutual aid can be an extremely powerful force. When building relationships, the key is to find people you can trust. You may literally be putting your freedom and your life in their hands, and they will need to rely on you. Typically, you will want to start with people you already know well.

A small number of strong connections is best. Even just one ally can be all you need. The quality of your relationships matters much more than the quantity. Once you have built strong relationships, as events happen in your community you can be available to help your connections, and you can ask them to help you.

One difference from RPGs is that you shouldn't introduce your party to each other unless there's a good reason. One of the most secure techniques is for people to use resources from one of their connections to help another of their connections without those people knowing who helped them. Here are two examples:

- A Community Leader has neighbor who works for the electric utility. The Community Leader learns of someone who needs sanctuary and asks the electric worker if they can help. The electric worker picks up the person who needs help and transports them to the house of a banker they know, where they can stay safe.

  If the regime wants to find the person who needs sanctuary, they may search the Community Leader's house. They might know of the Community Leader's connection with the electric worker, and search the electric worker's house too. But because the banker is two steps removed from the Community Leader, the regime doesn't find the hidden person.

- Now the electric worker learns that a Quisling and a Corrupt Bureaucrat have launched a scheme to demand bribes from people at the threat of cutting off their electricity. The electric worker tells the Community Leader, who tells a schoolteacher that is acting as an Archivist/Journaler.

  The Community Leader protects the identity of the schoolteacher by not telling the electric worker what they are doing with the information.

Providing Financial Help

If you can, one of the most direct ways to help people in your network is with money. Cash is best because it's hard to trace. Maybe you can't provide transportation to someone in need, but if one of your friends asks for gas money, your financial help can make a huge difference to someone in need of refuge.

You will also learn of organizations that are doing good work. Support them, and don't try to recreate the wheel. Helping an organization that already exists with monetary contributions is far more effective than trying to set up a new organization.

Exchanging Reliable Information

The regime will exercise control over the media, so your network may be one of the best ways to learn what is really happening. In the Cold War, citizens of the USSR understood that the official sources of news were worthless. Dissidents began secretly retyping and exchanging banned literature and news reports, a practice they called *samizdat* (rough translation: "we publish ourselves").

Your contacts can tell you news that they've heard from their contacts, and friends can share articles, photos, and videos. People in the Archivist/Journaler role can collect and integrate information from many sources to develop a more complete picture.

As a broader movement develops, requests from the organized resistance may come across informal networks like yours. For example, you might learn of the time and place of a nonviolent protest or the dates of a general strike. Be ready to join in and take to the streets when the time comes. Nothing is more effective at destabilizing a regime than mass public disobedience.

Engaging with Local Politics

Politics still matters, even in corrupt regimes that skew election results. Local elections are especially important. You and your network can support your community by taking part in local politics, or even running for a local office. Your community would benefit from having you or a friend of yours in office instead of some Quisling.